

We have families who have lost absolutely everything.

We have volunteer firefighters across much of this area who would literally be fighting the fire in one county in one area and hear on the radio about how a fire had broken out in another county on a road right near their own home, and literally volunteer firefighters fighting one fire could hear on the radio about the destruction of their home at a different fire.

In different places, the volunteer firefighters and those who were gathered, both career and volunteers, would see a raging fire at the home of their neighbor, of people they knew. In western Oklahoma, you know your neighbors in that area. You know the folks in the county. They would head out to a home as the fire was rushing at them and try to fight it off, try to cut a fire line to be able to stop it. Eventually, the fire would get so close, they would literally take their fire equipment and park the equipment between the fire and the home and spray down their equipment in hopes that the fire would jump over the house as the firefighters just huddled behind their own equipment hoping the fire didn't come to them. They saved several homes by using that extreme method.

Neighbors took their own farm equipment and their own tractors and created fire lines to be able to protect their neighbors' homes.

These small community firefighters fought fires for hours and hours. They saved a lot of lives, and they saved a lot of structures.

I can't even begin to tell you the pain of walking through that area, what has been described by many as walking across a moonscape of destruction where there is literally nothing left.

What have we seen in that? I will state that what we have seen is a tenacious spirit from people who survived an ice storm, were without power for weeks in many areas, and then had a wildfire come right behind it and destroy what was left. Over 20,000 bales of hay have already been donated from farmers all over Oklahoma who are trying to feed the cattle that are still left—20,000 bales. Understand the expense of 20,000 bales of hay being donated but also understand the efforts of all the truckdrivers who loaded up their vehicles and personally paid the gas money and the travel expenses to be able to deliver that hay over hundreds of miles to those folks. Oftentimes, the travel of that truckdriver and the gas required are more expensive than the hay that is in the back of it, and they are delivering as much as they possibly can.

I have to thank the folks from the Farm Bureau; the Oklahoma Cattlemen's Association; Western Equipment; Oklahoma Farm Credit; the Red Cross of Oklahoma; the Salvation Army; the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture; the Oklahoma Forestry Service; Southern Baptist Disaster Relief; Oklahoma emergency manage-

ment—first responders from all over the State, volunteer and career firefighters who worked very long and difficult hours. USDA and FEMA were also on site. I thank Harper County Extension; all the emergency management folks from Beaver, Harper, and Woodward Counties; all the folks who have donated, places like Love's Travel Stops that have donated so much to be able to move things there; the United Way; Cleanline Energy and their donations; and untold numbers of civic organizations and churches from around that community.

As I looked at many of those folks in the area last week and met with some leaders and pastors in the area, I reminded the folks that the devastation they face is not something that will be recovered from quickly. Springtime will come soon, and the area that is just black earth right now will spring to life with green grass again in the weeks ahead. But the loss of those fence lines, the loss of thousands of animals, the loss of homes, the loss of structures, will take a very long time for the folks—the farmers and ranchers who don't live on a high profit margin.

I have continued to encourage the pastors and churches in that area to walk alongside some families who will have a hard time recovering from this for a long time. I have encouraged our Oklahoma agencies and our Federal agencies to do what we can to be able to step in with repairing fence lines and helping them recover from a very traumatic event.

My wife and I stood with a rancher who talked about going out into the field after the fire. His home was completely destroyed. As he traveled out to the field around him checking on his cattle, he found dead cattle but also found cattle with their faces completely burned, blinded, with coyotes chasing them down. He said all he could do was stand there in the field and cry. These are going to be long days.

I am grateful that there are neighbors taking care of neighbors. I am proud of the people of Oklahoma watching out for each other. As we walk through this, God willing, we will continue to be able to hug and take care of our neighbors in the days ahead.

I want to tell this Senate and the people of the United States that this was a wildfire as big as the State of Rhode Island, and many people haven't even heard of it. But I can assure all of you that the folks in Oklahoma have experienced it, and we will walk through it together as a Nation.

With that, Mr. President, I yield back.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. LANKFORD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate be

in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

SUNSHINE WEEK

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, this week is Sunshine Week, an annual nationwide celebration of the good that comes from peeling back the curtains on government. Sunshine Week coincides with the National Freedom of Information Day and President James Madison's birthday, both of which occur on March 16.

James Madison understood the value of an informed citizenry as a necessary check against those in power. We shouldn't forget his call for the people to "arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."

More recently in our Nation's history, Justice Brandeis declared, "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants."

These sentiments hold true to this day. A government that operates in darkness—and a public that's kept in the dark—sows the seeds of waste, fraud, and abuse.

In the face of secrecy and obstruction, the public has a vital weapon: the Freedom of Information Act, FOIA.

Over 50 years ago, President Lyndon Johnson signed FOIA into law, establishing the public's judicially enforceable right to government information.

Before FOIA, the people had to justify their need for information to the government, but after FOIA, the government has to justify its refusal to release information to the public. FOIA's enactment marked a crucial step toward a government more accountable to the people.

No doubt, FOIA manifests Congress's recognition of the need to carefully balance the public's right to know and the government's interest in protecting certain information from disclosure, but practice and history demonstrates this balance has all too often been tilted away from transparency.

Many in government have continued to find ways to undermine citizens' right to know under FOIA. Transparency should be the norm, not the exception; yet, when it comes to FOIA requests, we have continued to see a government culture of delay, deny, and defend. When this happens, FOIA's effectiveness is undermined and the public becomes even more skeptical of its government.

We have seen this in one way or another under every administration, both Republican and Democratic, since FOIA's enactment, but the trend toward secrecy and obstruction in recent years should alarm all of us.

According to a March 14 Associated Press report, "The Obama administration in its final year in office spent a record \$36.2 million on legal costs defending its refusal to turn over federal records under [FOIA]."